

The Seduction of Materialism

It was time to send monthly reports to the home office in Akron, Pa., from our post in Grenada. Our supply of air mail envelopes had been used. Shopping in the small town where we lived was limited, but I remembered having seen air mail envelopes in the shop across the street.

Tucking some bills into my pocket I made my way to the shop. Yes, envelopes with the familiar red and blue border were on the shelf. I made my request for just one package. The shopkeeper scurried into the backroom, reached to another shelf, then gathered together a handful of envelopes binding them with a rubber band. Slowly it dawned on me what was happening. Envelopes were ordinarily sold one at a time as they were needed to mail a letter overseas.

Envelopes were not the only item bought and sold one at a time. Scouring pads, cigarettes, sandwich rolls, slices of cheese and numerous other items were sold one at a time for immediate use. There was little room in the tiny houses to store extra envelopes or large economy sizes of anything. Most shops were in a room of the family home with limited space. It was a matter of both merchant and consumer having small amounts of cash as well as limited storage.

While material goods are fewer in developing countries, is the seduction of materialism less? Perhaps, but not necessarily. I have learned that it is possible to live economically responsibly at any level. However, it may be easier when there are fewer material goods surrounding us. A trip to a North American shopping mall, where the limits of goods are boundless, certainly seduces.

The summer our family worked for voluntary service allowances at a church camp in the mountains, we saved more money than when we had summer jobs in the city. There was no daily paper full of "good buys" and no TV tempting with constant ads of latest gimmicks. We spent leisure time learning to know campers and staff as we hiked mountain trails.



Is it necessary to live in isolation from the industrial world to escape the seduction of consumerism? This is not practical for most of us most of the time. Living where materialism is rampant, it is necessary to make conscious decisions and to set limits. Basic lifestyle choices help us as we make purchases and set daily priorities. To me the guiding question is--what are the material goods I need to enable me to live a life pleasing to God and of service to other human beings?

As we planned a new house some years ago, we chose a site on marginal farmland. We were able to take advantage of trees and land contour for protection from winter cold and summer heat. Yet we found we needed to make compromises. We couldn't have everything. For example, we felt the cost of a solar water heater was more than we wanted to invest. Neighbors who made their own solar water heater found that in our Ohio climate, with on-again, off-again sunshine, a solar heater was not practical. In our home we rely partially on passive solar heat with a concrete heat bank, but we have supplemental wood and electric heat sources for adequate warmth in the winter.

A typical resident of the industrialized world uses 15 times as much paper, 10 times as much steel, and 12 times as much fuel as a resident of the developing world.

--Alan B. Durning in "How Much is Enough," *World Watch Magazine*, Nov.-Dec., 1990

"To me the guiding question is -- what are the material goods I need to enable me to live a life pleasing to God and of service to other human beings?"

Reading about others' experiences in living responsibly, such as Ron Sider's chapter on the graduated tithe in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, and living and traveling abroad, helped my husband and me set goals and ways to best use material possessions. We have found we must be open to change in our lifestyles and adapt as our situation changes from years with children in the home to years when they are living on their own. Households with single persons have needs different from those with children.

As I write the introduction to this issue and as I have been thinking about the topic and corresponding with contributors, I am reminded of all the resources at my disposal to assemble this small newsletter. The telephone reaches into all corners of North America. Postal service is regular and efficient. A word processor aids me as I put down my thoughts. In Grenada there was one copy machine available to us on the island; it was in the capital city 45 minutes away. Individual copies cost 50 cents each. Telephones, if available, might or might not work. Mail service was irregular. I ask myself how many material resources I have depended on to discuss the seduction of materialism.

Each of the writers in this issue discusses the topic from her/his vantage point, sharing personal feelings and experiences. My thanks to each for the fine way they have responded to the invitation to share openly of themselves. Perhaps their stories will stimulate you to think about the topic and its relevance to your lifestyle.

Sally Schreiner openly tells how she has lived in community sharing the common purse. Leona Penner tells a story that graphically portrays a dilemma of lifestyle differences in a Canadian setting; it is a story that might have taken place anywhere. Edie and Bruce Hochstetler tell of their adjustment as they return from a term with MCC in Bolivia. Many can identify with the throes of re-entry. There is a strong desire to continue to put people ahead of activities, yet a need to accept some of the customs in North American society. Where does one find support and how does one keep the vision alive? Marilyn Voran relates the topic to our common denominator, food. "More with less" is a phrase that has not lost its usefulness as a guideline for responsible living. Mary Beth Lind discusses the topic from an inner, spiritual perspective. For many this is where it must begin and where it must continue. Elizabeth Soto tells of the tensions for those born poor and gaining access to power through job and financial security. This has been the status of the immigrant to North America. Does this

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account bring to mind stories of European settlers coming to the New World? Can we learn from these stories and continue to relate them to worldwide as well as personal economic situations? Or do we want to forget the hard work and suffering?

The time frame for writing some of these articles was early winter when Christmas shopping was in full swing. Several writers felt the seduction of materialism afresh as they struggled with ways to celebrate the true meaning of Advent and Christ's birth. The Persian Gulf Crisis was also at its height when these articles were written. Can we (society) continue unrestricted lifestyles as we in North America consume one-fourth of the world's resources but make up only 5 percent of its population? Can we expect to live without war amid the inequitable distribution of resources? Are we living responsibly when we use more than our fair share of this world's goods?

Perhaps more questions than answers have been raised through the writing and reading of this issue. My prayer and challenge for each of us is that we consciously and constantly examine lifestyles and daily decisions in light of the biblical mandate to care for the earth and live as stewards of God's creation in global harmony with our brothers and sisters. May God give us the will and strength to change as we see the way.

Jocelyne T. Meyer, compiler of this issue, is a long time educator with special interests in responsible living and environmental issues. She and her husband Art began work with Mennonite Central Committee in 1981, following 23 years in Cleveland, Ohio, rearing a family of three, teaching in public schools and volunteering in church and community activities. Their first MCC assignment was in Grenada, West Indies. From there they moved to Akron, Pa., to work in the MCC Global Education office. In 1985 they settled in rural Fresno, Ohio, where they reclaimed strip mined land and continued research, writing and speaking regarding caretaking of the creation. They are co-authors of *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty, and Injustice* (Herald Press, 1991). Art Meyer died earlier this year.

What shall it profit them if they gain the whole world and lose their life?
--Matthew 16:26 (NRSV)

"So I continue to embrace the common purse as a welcome aid to help me stand against the seduction of materialism. I am grateful for the support of a group of people whose commitment makes it possible to keep taking risky steps of faith with my finances."

by Sally Schreiner

The Common Purse: Small Sacrifices for Larger Kingdom Ends

Two single peer friends at work spent a recent Saturday out in the suburbs getting "makeovers" at the hands of a cousin who is a hairdresser. Having satisfied themselves with their newly revamped images, they trained their improvement impulses in on me. Several hints were dropped about the benefits of upgrading my nondescript hairstyle and even trading in my perennially sliding-down-the-nose glasses for a pair of contacts.

Counter-cultural soul that I am at heart, I'm not sure I would have succumbed to such pressure in any case. But it was the Christmas season and my personal cash was in even shorter supply than usual. The \$35 minimum it would have taken to get my hair cut and styled by cousin Millie was out of the question. I laughed my friends off, but confess to harboring some feelings of wistfulness. Although I was single and made the same amount of money they did, my resources were already committed to other priorities.

Proceeding on to my Christmas shopping, I was aware how far I needed to stretch my meager savings to buy gifts for 13 family members I would be joining for a holiday reunion in New Hampshire. As I shopped for gifts for my brother's and sister's children, I felt vulnerable to comparisons with my oldest sister. Unmarried and childless like me, she has a large disposable income and generous heart. What would the nieces and nephews I see so infrequently think of my modest offerings?

Such are the twinges I periodically feel as I review my experience participating in common purse finances at Reba Place Fellowship. I have lived in economic community for the past 19 years with a committed core of brothers and sisters in my church. I contribute my paycheck to a common treasury and receive a monthly check which includes food and transportation funds, and a small personal allowance on a Voluntary Service-type scale. Housing, utilities, medical, vacation and other reimbursable expenses are paid directly from a central office. The portion of my income left after my expenses are covered, supports others in the common purse, helps fund capital expenditures such as buildings and vehicles and undergirds ministries in our church and beyond. As a not-for-profit corporation, we own and manage several buildings in a six-block area of Evanston as a service to members of the common purse, other church members and neighborhood people.



"Because I am part of a larger Kingdom whole, I can buy a building which provides shelter for people who need it. Isn't that really how I'd rather be using my resources? Yes!"

During the same Christmas season of my personal struggles with limited finances, an apartment building in our neighborhood came on the market. Respecting our investment in the neighborhood, the owner approached our fellowship to give us first chance at purchasing his six-flat building at a below-market rate.

We are committed to working at keeping our neighborhood multi-racial and economically diverse. As developers have been rehabilitating multi-unit buildings and converting them to condominiums, however, the number of rental units available to lower income families has been diminishing. Buying this building seemed like a good opportunity to keep affordable housing available to people in our neighborhood being squeezed out.

Within a couple of weeks we were able to come to unity on a decision to purchase the building. Mobilizing the resources to make a down payment followed quickly thereafter. I marvelled at this answer from God to my personal struggles with common purse finances. Yes, my choice to share the bulk of my income communally makes it difficult to invest big chunks of money in my personal appearance and fancy gifts. If I compare myself to my peers, I can occasionally feel insecure and apologetic about my inability to keep in step with the urge to consume, upgrade and outdo.

But because I am part of a larger Kingdom whole, I can buy a building which provides shelter for people who need it. Isn't that really how I'd rather be using my resources? Yes!

Without the discipline of a structure like the common purse, however, I'm afraid my money could easily dribble away on good but unnecessary purchases which don't really take me down the narrow road of discipleship from which the Lord beckons. So I continue to embrace the common purse as a welcome aid to help me stand against the seduction of materialism. I am grateful for the support of a group of people whose commitment makes it possible to keep taking risky steps of faith with my finances.

(And by the way, I had a great Christmas with my family. It comes as no great surprise that my nieces and nephews got far more enjoyment from my presence and involvement than from any toy I could have given them.)

Sally Schreiner lives in Chicago and serves on the staff of the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) and on the leadership team at Reba Place Church (MC/Church of the Brethren).

by Leona Dueck Penner

Too Much for One Canoe

(Based on a true story)

Not so long ago, in a certain southern Manitoba city, a young Chipewyan woman decided that she'd had enough of the bright lights and flesh pots of "Egypt" (not to mention the racism she'd experienced there) and that she wanted to return home to live in the more natural setting of a northern Canadian Indian reserve. Life was simpler there, she thought, and she would be accepted and loved just the way she was.

But before she left (having become obedient to the laws of the white man), she gave three weeks notice to her employer, collected her last pay cheque and began to pack her belongings.

And what a job that turned out to be!

First, she took down the pictures from the walls; then, she rolled up the bedding and the rugs; next, she emptied the clothes closet, the china cupboards, and the book shelves, packing box after box of her precious cargo till at last, the stacks of boxes in the center of her living room floor reached almost to the ceiling of her apartment.

She paused and looked at them with satisfaction, imagining the envious looks of her friends back home on the reserve. When they saw all her new clothes, her books and her fancy china, they would be so impressed with all that she had gained in a few short years away. Maybe they'd even decide to go to work in the city themselves. Many of them could certainly do with some new clothes and other nice things...

At last, the final box was packed, and she, worn out from her labors, fell asleep on her unmade bed.

And as she slept, she dreamed.

In her dream, she found herself on the banks of the great Red River with her big pile of boxes spread around her, waiting for the arrival of her brother who would bring the canoe for her journey homeward. Throughout the day, she waited and waited, till finally, just before sunset, she saw the

**A man is rich in proportion to
the things he can afford to let
alone.**

--Henry David Thoreau



slim shape of a canoe coming around a bend in the river. And before long, she could just make out the face of her young brother.

She waved to him happily, shouting her greetings across the quiet, flowing river. When at last her brother reached the shore, they embraced each other with great enthusiasm. Then quickly, before the sun dipped out of sight, they began loading the canoe for their pre-dawn departure.

At first, her brother seemed a little surprised when he saw her pile of belongings, but he didn't say anything. He just carried box after box onto the canoe, making sure he balanced the weight carefully, front and rear. Soon the canoe was full, but when the young woman looked at the shore, the stack of boxes there seemed hardly any smaller.

"Oh, why didn't you bring a bigger canoe?" she wailed. "This thing is so narrow, hardly any room at all!"

Her brother averted his eyes as he replied quietly. "But it's the biggest canoe we have on the reserve. And, besides, Grandmother said she was sure it would do..."

At the mention of her grandmother, the young woman became very quiet. Suddenly, she remembered the last conversation they'd had before she left.

Her grandmother had said then, "Remember my dear one, that if, when you come home from your adventure in the big city, you have more things to move than can fill one canoe,

then you will know that you have become greedy. You will have taken more than your share and others will not have enough. If you need more than one canoe for your belongings, then you'll know that you have left behind the sacred traditions of your elders and have accepted the white man's ways. Don't let that happen to you, my granddaughter."

In her dream, the young woman's eyes filled with tears of shame. How would she ever face her grandmother? She had become greedy and betrayed her trust... Then suddenly a solution came to her. Her grandmother need never know. She would give away all her extra belongings and return with just one canoe.

And when she woke, that's exactly what she did.

* * *

The echoes of "Go sell all that you have and give to the poor" are clearly present in this story. What haunts me is that we who are Christ-followers have so much trouble hearing and acting on this good advice in our daily lives. Instead, we become oppressed by our possessions--getting and spending to the point of exhaustion--when what we really need is to be freed from them. May God give us the grace to begin emptying our many canoes.

Leona Dueck Penner and her husband Peter are just beginning an MCC assignment in South Africa, after 5 years as co-directors of MCC Canada Peace and Social Concerns.

clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

--*I Timothy 6:6-10 (NRSV)*

Of course there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and

One decision which was influenced by our years in Bolivia was to live in a combined household with Bruce's parents. We have separate living space, but two families in one house means much less fuel, electricity and upkeep. Washer, dryer, garden tools, and countless smaller things are easily shared. Car pooling, bulk food buying, and using up leftovers are much easier than they would otherwise be.

It has made possible the opening of our home to a Guatemalan teenager who is fleeing violence in his country. Without a joint household, it would have been much more difficult to do this. And with an extended household, we can provide much more to him than any of us could alone.

by Bruce and Edie Hochstetler

Working at Lifestyle Choices After Living Overseas

Two short years ago, we returned to this country after three years with MCC in Bolivia. This article summarizes a few of our struggles since leaving rural Bolivia, especially in relation to our lifestyle.

Returning to one's own culture can be as shocking as entering a new one. Edie remembers neatly manicured lawns and the overwhelming number of choices in the mammoth-sized grocery stores. Bruce thought everything looked shiny, clean and brand new, and remembers being frustrated by the lack of public transportation.

While in Bolivia, we had placed a priority on fitting in to the culture. We lived in mud houses, drank from local wells, and walked or rode bicycle, as our neighbors did. However, not all aspects of the culture could be embraced from a Christian perspective, so considerable time was spent discerning how to embrace the good without condoning the detrimental.

We find ourselves doing the same discerning here in North America. It may be even more difficult than in Bolivia, for positive and negative cultural aspects seem tightly interwoven in our culture. We wrestle with questions of how our lifestyle affects those in the rest of the world, who do not have the luxury of choosing their lifestyle. We squirm when we read the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler, for we cannot deny that we are materially rich. We expect to always have those questions, and we hope they lead us to respond in some concrete ways.



A trying time of year for us is the Christmas season. The always present pressure to consume seems to reach its peak. Advertisers tell us in subtle ways that the way to love someone is through our checkbook or credit card and their latest gadget. Being without television and listening to commercial-free radio helps, but the secular Christmas cries of consumption are hard to squelch. At times we have replaced gift exchanges with a service project of some sort. Making gifts and giving gifts of food are also things we prefer. When buying gifts or cards, we feel better buying SELFHELP crafts or similar items, rather than being

Voluntary simplicity or personal restraint will do little good, however, if it is not wedded to bold political steps that confront the forces advocating consumption. Beyond the oft-repeated agenda of environmental and social reforms necessary to achieve sustainability, such as overhauling energy systems, stabilizing population, and ending poverty, action is needed to restrain the excesses of advertising, to

curb the shopping culture, and to revitalize household and community economies as human-scale alternatives to the high-consumption lifestyle.
--Alan B. Durning in "How Much Is Enough," *World Watch Magazine*, Nov.-Dec., 1990

supporters of Hallmark-sized businesses. These purchases help people in less fortunate areas of the world and create awareness for those receiving the handmade articles.

A better time of year for us is when spring arrives and the gardens can be planted. Gardens are a wonderful tonic in our fast-paced society. Vegetables that grow up in the backyard find their way to the table without petroleum-based pesticides, styrofoam and plastic packaging, or underpaid, exploitative migrant labor. Garden conversations tend to be better than average as well.

It has been encouraging to see recent interest in recycling. By shopping at used clothing stores, we are more likely to buy clothes because they are functional rather than because they are the latest style. And in our efforts to recycle, let us also remember that changing our habits of consumption could reduce the need to recycle.

These are only a few ways we have responded to a culture of materialism. Only a start, they are small steps which can be followed by larger ones. We also feel it is crucial to have the help of others as we try to walk against the traffic. We see the individualism of our culture as materialism's close ally. The more self-worth and identification we find in Christian community, the less we will need to seek it in the trappings of our society.

We would invite any ideas or suggestions from you as you also seek to follow Christ in a society that has filled itself with the things of lesser gods.

Bruce and Edie Hochstetler raise sheep and hogs and garden in Wellman, Iowa. Edie is also a nurse at the cancer unit of University of Iowa Hospitals and Bruce works at Schlabach and Sons Woodworking. They worked in health and agriculture in Bolivia.



by Marilyn Voran

Some Thoughts on Resisting Materialism When Shopping for Food

"Because of the strain on resources it creates, materialism simply cannot survive the transition to a sustainable world." (State of the World 1990, Lester R. Brown)

A large part of my resistance to the seduction of materialism in our society is targeted toward the way our food is produced and consumed. Along with increasing numbers of people, I am distressed that much of our food is produced and marketed in ways that harm the land, pollute the environment, and even oppress the people who grow our food.

The purpose of this article is to show how, in the midst of a materialistic culture that values production and consumption above all else, we can choose to use the earth's food resources in ways that uphold the values of justice and sustainability we say we believe in.

A place to begin is to recognize that life in affluent culture is the only reality most North Americans have ever known. This is how it has been for us. We need to acknowledge that, and then to reflect on how this has trapped us and how it affects what we are able to see and not able to see.

North Americans enjoy the economic miracle of cheap food. (In 1987, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. consumers spent less than 10 percent of their disposable income on food.) But what we don't see--what affluence has blinded us to--are the hidden costs of the way we presently produce and consume food.

"Most people who don't farm think of themselves as consumers rather than agriculturalists. Everyone who eats needs to understand that eating is an agricultural act and that how we eat determines to a large extent how the world is used."

Of the thousands of items on supermarket shelves, perhaps several dozen qualify as necessities. But we don't need to limit our buying to necessities. As incomes rise we can purchase more and more of the items that add variety, convenience and pleasure to our meals. Out-of-season fresh fruits and vegetables, once considered a luxury, are now taken for granted. Because our food system provides a wide range of options at prices we are willing to pay, we believe we have a right to more and more and more. We do not understand that the price marked on our food tells us nothing about its hidden costs, nor that its production might have violated values of justice and earth stewardship that we proclaim as part of our faith.



Let us be aware first of all, that our cheap food has been made possible at the expense of the farmer, not at the expense of the food processors or distributors, who receive 75 percent of every dollar spent for food. As this is being written, a group of Midwestern farmers are publicly demonstrating this inequity by selling loaves of bread for 5 cents apiece, the amount they are paid for the agricultural products in a loaf of bread.

Writings of Frances Moore Lappe and her colleagues at the Institute for Food and Development Policy clearly document that our cheap food has contributed to hunger, poverty and oppression in third world countries. In these places, large plantations of cash crops grown for export encourage the concentration of land and wealth among the powerful elite of the country and reinforce the powerlessness of the poor. Large fields of fruit and vegetables grown for the out-of-season market in North America supply us with cheap and varied food year-round while using land that should be growing a variety of crops needed to feed the local population. Our appetite for meat contributes to the production of feed grains at the expense of other crops for local consumption. It also contributes to rain forest destruction to provide grazing land, and thus to an environmental problem--global warming.

In *Family Farming, a New Economic Vision*, Marty Strange informs us how trends toward bigness and specialization in farming, driven by the overriding value of unlimited consumption, are connected to methods of farming that damage farmland by increasing the rate of topsoil loss. Methods associated with big farming require huge chemical inputs which eventually poison the soil and contaminate our water supply.

In addition to the costs to others and to the land and environment, there are costs to ourselves as consumers. In our supposedly cheap food there are hidden costs we pay in taxes. Our tax dollars not only pay agricultural subsidies (which benefit the wealthiest most) but also provide irrigation water and energy at large discounts to large growers.

A more subtle cost we pay is anxiety and uncertainty about the wholesomeness and safety of our food supply. We have reason to wonder whether there are unsafe levels of pesticide residues on our fresh produce. We wonder whether our food contains chemicals now regarded as safe, which will later be found harmful. We know that pesticides banned from use in North America but sold to Central American countries for use on export crops might find their way back to our tables.

A bumper sticker that appeared during the 1980's farm crisis said, "If you eat you're involved in agriculture." The truth of that statement is obvious--our lives depend on food and our food comes from the land. But most people who don't farm think of themselves as consumers rather than agriculturalists. Everyone who eats needs to understand that

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eating is an agricultural act and that how we eat determines to a large extent how the world is used. What shall we do? Here are a few suggestions. You can add others.

- 1) Participate in some way in food production. If it is only a tomato plant in a container in a sunny spot on our countertop, or parsley in a pot in a sunny window, you will understand more profoundly how your life depends on the soil and the energy of growing plants.
- 2) Prepare your own food. Food advertising has elevated convenience to the highest value, but "convenience" foods usually come at great environmental cost--excessive packaging (packets and cans within cartons) that waste resources and add to our solid waste disposal problem. And some packaging even costs you more than the contents of the package. Avoid packaged microwavable foods. They have a huge amount of packaging compared to the amount of food the package contains. Conventionally packaged food is perfectly microwavable in your own microwave dish. Choosing to prepare your own food gives you some measure of "quality control." You can eat confidently because you have some knowledge of what has been added to the food.
- 3) Buy locally grown food. Transporting food across the country uses large amounts of non-renewable fuel resources. By dealing with a local grower, you eliminate a long line of "middlemen" and advertisers who benefit at the expense of producers and consumers.
- 4) Buy certified organically grown produce. If there are no local growers, ask your supermarket to stock it. You will be confident you are not eating harmful pesticides and you will support farmers who are trying to farm in environmentally sound ways.
- 5) Avoid food from endangered environments such as the rain forests. Are we willing to participate in the destruction of rain forests (which are essential to the natural balance of the environment) in order to provide pasture so that our hamburgers will cost less?

Sacrificing convenience and sometimes paying a higher price for food are costs that accompany these shopping guidelines. These are costs I choose to pay in order to live toward that vision of a sustainable society that rejects materialism as a viable path to the good life.

Marilyn Voran of Goshen, Ind., worked at food and hunger education with MCC Great Lakes from 1984 to 1990. She is author of *Add Justice to Your Shopping List* (Herald Press, 1986).

by Mary Beth Lind

Seduction of Materialism--A Struggle

Journal entry: "Life seems a struggle. First a physical struggle--to stay in shape, to eat right, to work at wellness. Second, a psychological struggle--to be honest, to be in touch with myself, to avoid unhealthy co-dependence, but to recognize and nurture healthy interdependence. Third, a spiritual struggle--to grow, to be all I was meant to be, to deny my ego, to transcend my reality. God, have mercy on me, an unwhole person. God, help me to do my part--give me strength and courage. And beyond that 'grace me,' bless me."

And then--I get this letter from Jocele asking me to write an article on the Seduction of Materialism, to give my philosophy of life in story and example. Wow! So the first thing I write is "Seduction of Materialism--A Struggle." My one consolation is that as long as I experience it as a struggle, then I am not totally seduced.

But how do I fight the seduction? Why do I fight? What do I fight?

Lester and I have chosen a rural life. We live in the beautiful mountains of West Virginia, on a small farm near a small town. The major shopping centers are at least 25-80 miles away across four or more mountains. That makes the seduction less tempting!

**The advertising industry
spends nearly \$500 per U.S.
citizen annually.**

--Alan B. Durning in "How
Much is Enough," *World Watch*
Magazine, Nov.-Dec., 1990

We have also chosen not to have children. This means that we don't have to do, be, buy, etc. for the "children's sake." Or at least we don't have that excuse to use. Nor, are we faced with that constant temptation to consume that children can, in all innocence, present.

Another choice we have made is to have no TV. This is not so much a noble choice as practicality. Here in the mountains, reception is poor to non-existent without cable or a satellite dish. Anyway, without TV, we are not exposed to the "wealth" of advertising that TV offers. (And National Public Radio--our source of contact with the outside world--has very little advertising!)



Probably the one most significant choice we have made is the choice to only work part-time. No, change that to be employed part-time; we work full-time plus. Being employed only part-time helps to keep our standard of living down. It also means that we have time (not money) to do things for ourselves such as hang our clothes out to dry rather than use a dryer, to bake whole grain breads rather than buy them, to make our own granola, yogurt, sprouts, and to grow our own vegetables. It also means that we have time to enjoy our surroundings--canoeing, hiking, backpacking, cross country skiing and just sitting beside mountain streams. Not only are these things enjoyable but they promote wellness not only for ourselves but also for our world.

All these are good choices but are they just a cop-out? Do I choose a rural life with no children, no TV, and no full-time job just because I cannot cope with the pressures? Or do I choose it so I can be CONNECTED?

The seduction of materialism is that it fragments/divides. It divides us from ourselves--it treats us as soul-less bodies; it divides us from our neighbors--ever in competition (keep up with the Joneses); and it divides us from creation--by making work drudgery, not creative expression.

And, as the seduction of materialism divides, it seeks the lowest common denominator, which is money. Everything is then reduced to money. "Time is money." We work only for money and our work is separate from our lives. We leave work to "enjoy life."

And so we slip into the vicious cycle of being fragmented, running in several directions at once, and feeling so lonely and empty that we spend money in the pathetic belief that we can purchase security and wholeness, only to discover that there is never enough!¹

Help! How do we break out of this vicious cycle of materialism?

First, we refuse to reduce everything to the lowest common denominator. Instead we enlarge everything to its highest common integer--God. Instead of reducing everything to money, and hence consumption, we raise everything to its rightful place as part of God's creation, and hence stewardship.

Second, we refuse to be divided and fragmented. In an age of specialists, we choose to be generalists. Instead of doing one thing "well," we reveal the connections and accept the responsibility of insuring the good of the whole of Creation.²

Third, we cultivate a "keen eye for the inessential... There is a deep satisfaction in rousing a supposed need out of its hallowed niche."³ We continually challenge our definition of adequate, until we can live like the children of Israel in the desert collecting manna--always adequate, never excess.⁴

And finally, we nurture our center, so that we don't become lost. "True lostness is when you have forgotten the spiritual center of your life, when your values have gotten so warped with time that you do not remember what is truly important."⁵ We all have different ways of nurturing that spiritual center. The exact method is not important, but the nurture is crucial.

"As a child I did not have control of the poverty I lived in, but as an adult I have some choices I can make responsibly. I too fear poverty, but I fear even more what materialism can do to my faith."

For myself, meditation is what nurtures my center. It helps me see the fragmentation for what it is and then to catch glimpses of God's reality where everything is connected and whole; where there is adequacy and security. Meditation is my feeble steps in the direction of wholeness which allows God to sweep me up in a wild embrace of shalom, in the midst of the struggle.

Thanks, God, for grace!

Among other interests, Mary Beth Lind of Harmon, W. Va., manages a historic water-powered grist mill and craft shop, where she teaches hand weaving. She is a registered dietitian and does nutritional consulting. She and her husband Lester serve as spiritual resource people for the MBM Voluntary Service Program. They are developing a retreat center, and worship at Philippi Mennonite Church in rural Appalachia.

Notes:

1. *Laurel's Kitchen* by Laurel Robertson, Carol Flinders and Bronwen Godfrey, Nilgiri Press, 1978, p. 46.
2. *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture* by Wendell Berry, Avon Books, 1977, p. 17ff.
3. *Laurel's Kitchen*, p. 42.
4. Exodus 16.
5. *The Tracker* by Tom Brown, Jr. as told to William Jon Watkins, Berkley Books, 1978, p. 135

by Elizabeth Soto

The Seduction of Materialism

Is it correct to say that women tend to be more seduced by materialism than men? The media plays an important role through the type of advertising it uses to promote sales. Women are not the only human beings that are seduced by the materialistic mentality; we are all influenced by this affluent society.



Is it correct to assume that the rich are more subject to materialism than the poor? We are all exposed to the trap of materialism. The attitude can prevail in both poor and rich. The moment they make wealth their highest goal, material things become more important than spiritual and intellectual values, and the seduction has happened. This is when we cannot allow poverty to be a justification for materialism.

Women in Ministry:

* **Donella Clemens** has been nominated to be the first woman moderator in the Mennonite Church. She will become moderator-elect this year and moderator in 1993. She has been active in the Franconia Conference and has served on the Mennonite Church General Board since 1985, the last three years on the Executive Council. In her

local congregation, Souderton (PA) Mennonite Church, she is an elder, adult Sunday school teacher and education coordinator. She and her husband Wayne have three grown children.

* **Sheila Klassen-Wiebe**, Richmond Va., has been appointed to a two-year term beginning this fall to teach New Testament at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, Man.

* **Nancy Brubaker Bauman**, co-pastor at First Church, Reedley, Calif., was ordained October 14, 1990.

The spirit of consumerism is present everywhere. We live in a society in which the wants are becoming needs: microwave ovens, videos and VCRs, computers. The issue is the value we place on material items. But what does this mean for those of us who want to have a simple lifestyle? How do we live modestly without allowing our possessions to control our decisions?

As a child I learned to enjoy the comfort of my home, but my parents always reminded me of their story and told me to keep in mind that perhaps tomorrow I would not have this security. The story of my family is the story of many Puerto Ricans whose history is that of peasants working on land they never owned. They managed to come out of that poverty and become blue-collar factory workers.

My parents followed the steps of many Puerto Rican families, impoverished and unemployed, who left the country. In 1959 they moved temporarily to Chicago with the dream of saving some money and returning to Puerto Rico. It was hard to survive in a foreign country with an unknown language as they sought better opportunities. It was extremely difficult to nurture Christian faith and maintain spiritual values in a materialistic society. Families were separated when both parents needed work, victims of a desire for a better tomorrow. The ability to buy material goods was a way of moving away from that poverty, and with this ability came the increased valuing of these goods. Having more than we needed brought an idea of progress, and with it a decrease in the sense of sharing.

In 1971 the accumulation of material goods gave us the chance to return to the island. Buying a house was an historic step. My parents still live with the reality that it does not take much to lose it all and become poor once again. The fear of poverty will always be there like a shadow--my shadow. We are similar to many Mennonite immigrants from Europe, who came to this country in search of a better life, fleeing wars and the resulting poverty. Accumulation of material goods became a means of security.

For many minorities--black, Hispanic, Native American-- at the lower end of the economic scale, the issue of materialism means something very different than it does to those who have long been affluent. A simple lifestyle may feel too close to the poverty they once had. While it may be an option for a white person who has always had plenty in the material sense, for a minority person it feels like a step backward.

For many Anabaptist Christians, a simple lifestyle helps them to keep away from the seduction of materialism. This has been their choice of an answer to materialism. The question for reflection is, how much in the way of material goods can we do without? Can we eliminate something from our lives without feeling neglected or denying ourselves the essentials? We are called to awareness of the seductive power we are exposed to, and to the acknowledgement that as long as we live in a wealthy country we will need to continually restate our faith and to take a position that best portrays the gospel message.

The rich young man who came to Jesus asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' command was clear, and the man understood the implications of letting go of his richness. We are all seduced by materialism, and we know what it means to surrender that bank account, or that piece of land, but if those things are limiting our lives, we are dominated by them. That was the main problem with the young man: he would not live without it. Many Christians who want to take seriously Christ's call to "let go and follow" struggle with this question.

As a child I did not have control of the poverty I lived in, but as an adult I have some choices I can make responsibly. I too fear poverty, but I fear even more what materialism can do to my faith. So I hear Christ's call and have decided to respond. Christ presents an example that today still continues to be a challenge. I have accepted this challenge.

Elizabeth Soto of Lancaster, Pa., is assistant director for Latin America and the Caribbean at MCC. Of Puerto Rican origin, she holds as master's degree in art in religion from the Seminario Evangelico in Puerto Rico.

• **Ingrid Peters** was licensed and installed as pastor of Kingston (Ont.) Mennonite Fellowship on Jan. 13. She serves the congregation on a half-time basis, while also working in prison ministry.

• **Ingrid Loepp** was licensed and installed as associate pastor of Steinmann Mennonite Church, Baden, Ont., on Jan. 20.

• **Dee Swartz** was licensed as associate pastor of Zion Mennonite Church, Archbold, Ohio, on Feb. 24.

• **Brenda Glanzer** was licensed as minister of education at Hesston (Kan.) Mennonite Church on Jan. 13. She has been serving since last summer.

• **Donna Shenk** was licensed as deaconess at Blossom Hill Mennonite Church, Lancaster, Pa., on Feb. 24.

• **Catherine Longenecker** was ordained by Virginia Conference on Feb. 16 for chaplaincy work. She serves as co-chaplain, along with her husband Dan, at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community in Harrisonburg.

Resources

Alternatives, A quarterly review, Vol. 16, No. 3, Fall 1990. This issue helps put money into perspective by examining human and economic costs. Good analysis and appropriate suggestions from a variety of writers.

Alternatives: To Celebrate, Alternatives, P.O. Box 429, Ellenwood, GA 30049, 1987. This "catalog" includes selected articles from previous "catalogs" dealing with ways to observe holidays and special times in view of the world's diminishing resources.

Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics*, North Point Press, 1987. A collection of essays by a writer/environmentalist who has a deep regard for the earth and all in it. His emphasis on values gives guidelines that help with perspectives on material possessions.

Earth Stewardship Packet, MCC Information Services, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500. Also available from MCC Canada, 134 Plaza Drive, Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9 and MCC regional and provincial offices.

Includes a variety of articles dealing with responsible use of resources, practical guidelines to living responsibly on the earth and an annotated bibliography of books, periodicals and audio visuals. Regularly revised.

George, Denise. *The Christian as Consumer*, Westminster Press, 1984.

Promotes wise use of money so that Christians who have access to resources can share with those who have less. Practical suggestions are given along with responsible lifestyle options.

Longacre, Doris Janzen. *Living More with Less*, Herald Press, 1980.

Introduces five standards to guide the Christian in living more responsibly. Ten chapters of "living testimonies" reinforce these standards with personal examples from world-wide experiences.

Meyer, Art and Jocele. *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty, and Injustice*, Herald Press, 1991.

This study book and reader focuses on environmental degradation, and on the relationship of environmental issues to war and conflict, food issues, and agriculture. It also offers perspectives on lifestyle issues and wise use of resources.

Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Word Publishers, revised 1990.

"The most persuasive presentation of the biblical case against hunger that I have ever read," Arthur Simon, Bread for the World. An excellent handbook for hunger awareness and lifestyle study and practice.



Voran, Marilyn Helmuth. *Add Justice to Your Shopping List*, Herald Press, 1986.

An information-packed guide to responsible food shopping in light of hunger, poverty and economics. Suggests ways to respond with thoughtful grocery shopping and food preparation.



**Illustrations in this issue
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News and Verbs

- A consultation on peace theology and how **women's experience of violence shapes that theology** will be held at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) in Elkhart, Ind., October 4-5. The event is sponsored by the AMBS Women's Advisory Council in cooperation with the Institute of Mennonite Studies and the Peace Studies program. Lynell M. Bergen, seminary student from Winnipeg, Man., chairs the planning committee.

WOMEN'S CONCERN REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERN REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Karen Falk. Correspondence and address changes should be send to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

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**Forwarding
and address
correction
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- **Gayle Gerber Koontz** was officially installed as dean at AMBS on April 19. She was appointed in 1989 and began duties in January. At the installation she gave an address on the theme "Pursue the Vision." She has been a member of the AMBS faculty since 1982 and served as acting dean from 1985-86.
- **Liz Hunsberger** of Akron, Pa., is new director of Mennonite Central Committee visitor exchange programs. She succeeds **Doreen Harms**, who retired after 43 years with MCC. Hunsberger oversees the International Visitor Exchange Program, Intermenno, SALT International and Youth Discovery Teams programs.
- **Lydia Kay Mertz** will begin as campus physician at Goshen (Ind.) College in July. She succeeds Willard Krabill, who is retiring. Mertz has been a family doctor in Goshen and in Bristol, Ind.
- Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA) has produced an **AIDS Resource Guide**, a 16-page pamphlet designed to help congregations respond to the AIDS epidemic. It includes lesson plans for small-group study, a quiz on AIDS knowledge, Bible verses to study, and a listing of other resources. It was produced by MMA's Wellness Program. The guide is available free from Ann Raber at MMA, Box 483, Goshen, IN 46526.

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